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## ORTHODOX JEWISH CUSTOMS IN THEIR RELATION TO THE NURSING PROFESSION<sup>1</sup>

By RABBI LEO FRANKLIN

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It is axiomatic that, next to a knowledge of the technical details of her profession, the greatest need of the nurse who shall attain to real efficiency in her work is sympathy with her patient. I do not, of course, mean by this that soft emotionalism which runs to over-indulgence, nor yet the employment of sweet and honeyed words where sternness is needed to bring a patient to terms, but by sympathy I mean an understanding of the mental attitude of the patient and of his environmental influences that go to shape that attitude. In these days when even the most conservative of medical authorities are conceding the value, within limits of course, of certain forms of mental therapeutics, no lengthy argument should be necessary to establish this fact as fundamental. A disregard of it may almost invariably explain the utter failure of some otherwise proficient nurses to deal satisfactorily with cases of illness in the homes of the foreign elements that form so large a portion of the population of our great cities today. In the case of the Orthodox Jew this is particularly noteworthy. Due to religious customs which, through long usage, have become part of his very life, but which are strange and peculiar to her, the patient is frequently unresponsive to the best-intentioned offices of the nurse who, in the goodness of her heart, is doing the very things which, from the nature of the case, must be absolutely repulsive to her patient. In order that a closer bond of sympathy between the nurse and her patient of Orthodox Jewish faith may be established, it shall be my purpose in this paper to deal with some of the more important ceremonials practiced by the Orthodox Jew, which have a more or less direct bearing upon the nursing profession. In doing so, I trust that you will understand that I am in nowise censuring the nurse for her misunderstanding of these customs and conditions. From the nature of things she has had no opportunity of learning about them, and they remain a Chinese puzzle to her. Nor do I forget the added difficulty that confronts the nurse in dealing with a patient whose language she cannot understand. Added to all the other hardships and responsibilities of the nursing profession, this is one that may not be lightly passed over.

<sup>1</sup> Read before the Wayne County Nurses' Association, Detroit, Mich., March 7, 1913.

The most obvious solution of this difficulty would be that a sufficiently large number of women, consecrated by a love of the work, who themselves have sprung from the ranks of the Orthodox Jews, should be induced to enter upon the profession of nursing as a life work, but that is undoubtedly a dream, the realization of which will come, if at all, only in the very remote future.

Before taking up in detail the ceremonies that have a bearing upon the problem of the nurse, it is well to draw a clear distinction between what I have called the Orthodox Jew and the Liberal or Reform Jew. The Orthodox Jew is he who tries to observe the very letter of the Biblical law, and who recognizes the binding authority upon him of the traditional or Rabbinic law. The Reform Jew, on the other hand, lays little stress upon the letter of the law, but tries to observe its spirit. This distinction may become clearer to you if I illustrate it through an example. In the sixth chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, following the remarkable passage "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!" we come upon the verses "Thou shalt bind them [namely, the foregoing words] as a sign upon thy hand and they shall be as a guide before thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the doorposts of thy house and on thy gates." Now the Orthodox Jew, through a ceremonial known as putting on the phylacteries, actually does bind the words cited in the foregoing verses of the chapter, upon his head and upon his arms, the passage being written upon parchment and encased in a little leathern box which being attached to straps made for the purpose, are daily bound, as I have said, upon the head and the arms, thus literally carrying out the mandate of the Bible.

The Reform Jew, on the other hand, realizing that such could never have been the meaning of the lawgiver, interprets this noble passage of Scripture to mean that the words of God should ever be a guiding force in the life of men, directing their eyes to truth and their hands to helpful work. Similarly, the Orthodox Jew interpreting the verse "Thou shalt write them upon the doorposts of thy house" actually does write these words upon his doorpost and you may see them there as you pass into his home, encased in a little tin or wooden box and nailed upon the doorpost. The Reform or Liberal Jew, however, disregarding the letter of the law, as having no significance, holds the passage to mean that God's words shall become an inspiration in every household, that every hearth shall be a shrine where love is the ministering priest.

Now it goes without saying that in the home of the Reform Jew or the Liberal Jew, the nurse will meet with none of these problems that naturally confront her when she enters the home of our Orthodox brethren, whose religious life is very largely a structure of ritualism, formalism

and ceremonialism, that to her unaccustomed eyes seems very strange and grotesque, and sometimes even weird and ridiculous. In passing judgment upon it, however, we must not fail to recall that to the foreigner many of our customs seem very strange. I remember hearing a young Chinaman, a splendid musician, at the University of Michigan, say in explanation of the weird character of Chinese music, that to him our great American and European orchestras sounded, until he understood the principles of harmony as worked out by us, merely a medley of the most grotesque and unappealing sounds. To enter sympathetically then into the mental attitude of another, we must know something of the principles upon which that other's life is builded.

I have said that the Orthodox Jew attempts to carry out the very letter of the Bible law. Now something ought to be said, I believe, in regard to the sanitary value of certain laws of the Bible in the light of our modern knowledge, for there are many enthusiastic lovers of the Bible who maintain that not a few Biblical laws, especially those contained in the dietary legislation of the Bible, were intended primarily—if not entirely—as sanitary regulations. With this conclusion I for one take issue. While undoubtedly it seems to be true that those who wrote the portions of the Bible in which the dietary laws are contained, had a considerable knowledge of certain food values, it can scarcely be maintained that they made their rulings in regard to the prohibited foods purely on hygienic grounds, for were this the case how shall we explain the fact that certain kinds of food which they prohibited to the Jew, they permitted them to sell to the non-Jew for consumption as food? It is perfectly obvious that these laws were laid down not as sanitary, but rather as religious regulations, and that their health value was secondary and perhaps even altogether unknown to the legislators. In one respect perhaps the ancient Biblical law-givers did have a fine conception of what medical science today is especially insisting upon. I refer to their laws of quarantine against contagious disease, particularly in regard to that most loathesome disease of the ancient Orient, leprosy. And incidentally I have little doubt that our nurses and health authorities would experience considerably less difficulty in enforcing the laws of quarantine today in cases of communicable disease among the Orthodox Jews if their knowledge would permit them to turn authoritatively to this code in the book of Leviticus, (Chap. 14 ff) and show to the often recalcitrant patient and his family that the segregation of persons and places infected is no mere whim of modern physicians, but that it is based on the law to which they themselves give allegiance. And similarly, by the way, the difficulty encountered so frequently in persuading the Orthodox Jews to go the hospital, where perforce their dietary

régime will be broken, might be obviated if the nurse and doctor only knew and could bring home to the patient the fact that in the so-called "Schulchan Aruch" as the traditional code book of the Orthodox Jew is called, it is distinctly set down that in case life is endangered, all the religious laws may be broken with the single exception of those prohibiting idolatry, adultery and the shedding of blood.

Coming now to a somewhat more detailed treatment of the ceremonies of Orthodox Judaism that bear upon the nursing profession, we may say that they have to do with: (a) diet, (b) prayer and ritualistic forms, (c) home ceremonials, (d) religious rites associated with child birth, (e) death and burial.

Of these I mention the subject of diet first, because, by coincidence, it plays such a leading part both in the nurse's profession and in the life of the Orthodox Jew, and it is upon this point, more than any other, perhaps, that nurse and patient are likely to clash. It should be said in dealing with this subject that the dietary customs observed by the Orthodox Jew go much farther than those laid down in the Bible, and embrace as well the varied and minute extensions of the Biblical law for which mediaeval and rabbinical authorities are responsible. When the nurse, who is a stranger to the customs of an Orthodox Jewish home, enters there to attend her patient, she will be struck at once with certain regulations that are entirely strange to her. In the first place she will find that many articles of diet which she is accustomed to give to her patients, are here absolutely taboo. Ham, for instance, indeed any form of the meat of the swine, is entirely forbidden. Oysters and other sea foods she cannot give her patient. Indeed, she will find that the Orthodox Jew rigidly insists upon the observance of the Biblical law that in the realm of animals those are prohibited for food which do not chew the cud and which have not the cloven hoof, or which lack in either one or the other of these matters, and so far as fishes are concerned, those are prohibited which have not both fins and scales, a prohibition which as you will see includes all forms of shellfish and other sea foods which are frequently given as delicacies to convalescent patients.

But the difficulty of the nurse will not end when she knows what dishes must be absolutely excluded, for she will find that even among those permitted as food, there are certain mixtures which shall in nowise be allowed. Milk foods and meat foods cannot be eaten together or within stated intervals of one another. Generally it is accepted as law that food made with milk or butter may be eaten within three hours after partaking of a meal of meat, while if the process is reversed, the meat may be eaten within half an hour after the milk. As though this were not sufficient to confuse the poor nurse, she must be further confounded

by the fact that there must be one set of dishes used for the cooking and serving of meat foods and quite another for the cooking and serving of milk foods, and that to interchange one of these with the other is to render it incapable of further use in the Orthodox Jewish household. Nor can she go to the corner grocery and butcher shop to buy for her patient her chicken or her cut of steak, but all the meat which she serves must be duly slaughtered by the so-called "Schochet" or official religious slaughterer of animals, and this meat having been obtained, it must go through a further process of so-called "koshering" which means that it must be successively soaked in water and embedded in salt for a definite period before it is religiously allowable, this being the rabbinical interpretation of the Biblical law, that the blood of the animal shall not be eaten.

To those who are strange to these customs they must seem very ridiculous indeed, and they are not to be blamed overmuch if at first they have little sympathy or indulgence for those who, at the risk of delaying their convalescence or even preventing their ultimate recovery, insist upon refusing dainty foods, because they are not ritually allowable, while they are willing to partake of other foods, often without nutritive value, which the physician absolutely prohibits. But I am sure their sympathies will be deepened and they will come to indulge the whims of these people somewhat if they can but realize how much a part of their lives are these things, and how they would rather face death itself than turn their back upon these traditions which, through a lifetime, they have regarded as binding upon them. Of course, we know that in emphasizing the letter of the law, they are sacrificing its spirit; of course we know that all this is very foolish, but at the same time *if we wish to exert the best possible influence over the patient, we must put ourselves into such sympathy with him as will allow us to put ourselves in his place for the time being, and to enter into his mental attitude.*

Dealing with the second division of the ceremonials under discussion, we come to the prayer and ritualistic forms of the Orthodox Jew. It is a striking fact that the Orthodox Jew seldom misses an opportunity to pray, and endless would be the list of occasions that might be cited for which he has some particular benediction. From sunrise unto sunset he could be busy at this service if he chose, praying before he washes his hands in the morning and again before he breaks bread, saying one sort of prayer over one kind of food and another over some other kind of food, breathing one petition if the food he eats happens to be the first of its kind of which he has partaken during that season, saying a prayer if he is about to start upon a journey, one sort of prayer if he goes by land and another if he goes by sea, and so on through the whole day's routine until at night he closes his eyes with yet another prayer upon his lips. Now this

constant attention to religious observances, if on the one hand it has a tendency to sanctify the secular, on the other serves to the neglect of other duties which to many of us seem quite as important, and it is only as we understand again how essential a part of the Orthodox Jew's whole life these prayer forms are, that we can persuade ourselves to enter sympathetically into his lip observance that is frequently coincident with the neglect of other things that to us seem more urgently pressing. *But on the other hand the very conjunction of the religious forms with the affairs of daily life may frequently be used by the wise nurse and physician as hygienic agencies.* Thus, for instance, the so-called ritualistic bath which is rigidly observed by the Orthodox Jewess, may be used as a means of persuading her that a greater frequency of bathing, both for herself and her children, will be a fulfillment of religious customs. *In other words, what we need to do in dealing with people whose customs are strange to us, is not to belittle those customs, nor to lose our patience with those who practice them, but rather to use them as the means of bringing about the very conditions which, from the hygienic standpoint, we wish to establish.* To call these customs foolish is to cut off every possibility of sympathy between patient and nurse. To indulge them is to establish the possibility of a more sympathetic understanding and consequently of a closer coöperation between them.

The home ceremonials of Orthodox Judaism, though they have elements that are somewhat strange to those who see them for the first time, are not without their elements of great beauty, and they too may be used as so many levers with which to lift the patient, ignorant of the laws of sanitary living, into a knowledge and appreciation thereof. Thus, for instance, the ceremonials in the Jewish home incident to the ushering in of the Sabbath may effectively be used by the clear-visioned and tactful nurse. Commenting upon the beauty and the inspiration of the white cloth and the lighted candles that are invariably a part of these ceremonies, she may persuade the mother that this spirit of cleanliness and of order and of cheer might be made a part of the household, not one night in the week, but every night, and thus all unconsciously the wife and mother might be made to work a very revolution within her home that would be all for good. Other similar ceremonies which the nurse sees practiced she might similarly use for the upbuilding of the home.

Two occasions in the Orthodox Jewish home present some peculiar problems to the nurse. One is the occasion of child birth, particularly if the child be a boy, and the other is the case of death. With the former we need not here deal except to explain, as every good nurse already knows, that the period for the religious dedication of the male child,

through the ceremony of circumcision, is a time of tremendous nervous strain to the mother, and that at that time the utmost tact and diplomacy is necessary on the nurse's part to calm the anxiety of the mother. Nor is this relieved in the homes where customarily the ceremony is accompanied by a feast given to friends and relatives, often accompanied by considerable noise and confusion, which just at this time should be absent. So it is that the tact of the nurse is put to one of its severest tests.

In the case of death and burial of the Orthodox Jew, again the nurse must be extremely politic, for around death hover so many superstitions that when bereavement of this sort falls upon him he is, as a rule, very difficult to deal with. Often the nurse who has been uniformly kind and considerate to the patient, will be frowned upon the moment that patient has passed away, and she who, with the utmost tenderness, cared for the sufferer, will be almost ruthlessly driven away from touching the dead. In a case of this kind the nurse, understanding the peculiar conditions that surround the Orthodox beliefs in regard to death, will take no offense but content herself with giving kindly advice and such help as she can to the characteristically-emotional household; she will feel that the refusal of those bereaved to permit her to participate in the last offices to their dead is not a reflection upon her, nor yet upon their affection for her, but that it is born simply of a narrow superstition, deeply embedded in them, that none but their own co-religionists must touch the body of one whose spirit has flown to the great beyond.

The essential point that I desire to emphasize is that the work of the nurse among the class of people with whom we are dealing will be not only more efficient, but also more satisfactory to herself if, through a knowledge of the conditions out of which these people have come to be what they are, she succeeds in putting herself for the time being in their place and thus establishes between them and herself a bond of sympathetic understanding.

Perhaps I should give you one further thought before concluding. Frequently it is felt by the nurse who goes into the Orthodox home in the poverty-stricken ghetto districts of the great city, that her task is almost hopeless because of the filth that so often abounds there, and in her mind somehow she comes to associate that filth with the fact that these people are Jews. Naturally such an association of ideas tends to a breaking down of sympathy. And how unjust it is! If there is one people on the face of the earth whose religious laws insist upon cleanliness in regard to the physical body, in regard to the home environment and in regard to the food which one eats, it is the Jew. Indeed, the very word "Kosher" which is the name given to permitted food, is by some translated as "clean," though a scientific knowledge of the Hebrew would not quite

uphold that meaning. But this fact stands out, where these people are steeped in mire and in filth, it is due not at all to their religious condition, but it is the result of their poverty and of the social conditions which compel them to live in their miserable hovels, overcrowded and cramped together in a fashion that would ill befit even the dumb brutes, to whom oftentimes we give better care than to some poor human beings. It is well for us who are fortunately placed, who have our large, well-lighted, well-ventilated rooms, homes with abundant bathing and sleeping facilities, to preach to these poor creatures about keeping their windows open, about bathing regularly and what not, but who shall tell whether we would be more docile than they in these matters were their positions and ours to be reversed?

I am pleading for a greater sympathy for the unfortunate members of our community who frequently understand us as little as we understand them. Let it be our part, as helpers of humanity, and certainly of all the professions none so consecrates itself to human helpfulness as the profession of nursing, to do what we may to enter into the moral and spiritual life of those whose language and whose customs are strange to us, but who, beyond their outward differences, are after all, blood of our blood, flesh of our flesh and spirit of our spirit.

### MILK FUND ASSOCIATION NURSING<sup>1</sup>

By M. B. McCLELLAND

*Louisville, Kentucky*

The purpose of the Association is to reduce infant mortality and to increase the health and vitality of the surviving children. Perhaps half the mortality of the first year of life is due to ignorance, carelessness and indifference, and the milk-fund nurse must wage constant and relentless battle against this three-headed enemy if she hopes to make even a slight impression upon its stronghold, which is the home of the people.

The nurse is an important member of that devoted band of workers who are striving to lower infant mortality and to better conditions in general for children. She may be a factor for great good, or she may exert a harmful influence in the district of her activities, according to her equipment for the rigorous responsibility of such work.

When the nurse goes into the home and community she is given the opportunity of learning the relation of the environment to the welfare

<sup>1</sup> Read before the Kentucky State Association of Graduate Nurses, June 3, 1913.